

Hunting for the Hungry

By Ron Wilson

It's early September, less than a week into the state's bowhunting season, and David Tabor is making plans for the deer he'll arrow. Success is not a given, of course, but what hunter goes into the field without a quiver loaded with optimism?

Tabor, Dickinson, who also hunts deer during North Dakota's gun season, is looking to put venison on his dinner plate and someone else's. "I've wanted to do this since I started bowhunting," he said of donating his harvest to someone less fortunate. "But it's one of those programs you don't really hear that much about. I simply started by calling around to see where I could donate a deer if I shot one."

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In 2004, 115 deer were processed and distributed to needy families. In 2005, that number jumped to 241, and in 2006 hunters donated nearly 370 deer that, after processing, ended up in a number of food pantries and other emergency food outlets in North Dakota.

North Dakota Community Action Association is trying to change that. NDCAA, which helps low income people become self sufficient, started Sportsmen Against Hunger, a public education campaign in 2004 to encourage community wildlife groups around the state to develop venison donation programs. Many people can use the venison, said Ann Pollert, NDCAA executive director in Fargo, as one in 10 North Dakotans are living in poverty.

"Each year, thousands of North Dakota families encounter hunger. North Dakota hunters can share their bounty with organizations that feed and nourish families and individuals across the state," the Sportsmen Against Hunger literature states. "Sportsmen Against Hunger chapters are sporting groups with a philanthropic mission of donating venison to emergency food outlets."

Currently, Pollert said about 12 clubs around the state donate money to pay for processing deer donated by hunters. "The money I get from these organizations stays in their region," she said. "If I receive money from a statewide organization, the money is sent to where it is needed."

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"The venison is very much appreciated as it's often difficult to get our hands on good, quality protein," Pollert said. "Most of the meat processors we work with give us a break – our range is \$35-\$60 per deer cut and wrapped – but I don't expect it as this is their business."

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department encourages North Dakotans who hunt to share nature's bounty with others through programs such as Sportsmen Against Hunger, said Randy Kreil, Department wildlife division chief. "The concept of sharing wild game or fish with others who do not hunt or fish for whatever reason is nothing new – people in the state have been doing this for decades," he said. "What is different with this effort is the organized manner in which it is being done. Ann Pollert, in particular, with her enthusiasm and drive has almost single-handedly coordinated the efforts of local wildlife clubs and interested individuals into an organized and efficient program."

If your organization is interested in initiating its own donation program, call Pollert at 701-232-2452. Hunters wanting to donate deer are also encouraged to call her for a list of cooperating meat processors.

"I want to personally talk to those club members and hunters to further sell the Sportsmen Against Hunger program," Pollert said. "I'm very proud of where the program is today, but we still need to grow."

A fundamental aspect of the tradition of hunting in this country and our state, Kreil said, is that you use what you harvest. "Using the resource in a responsible way can and often does include sharing it voluntarily with others," he said. "But to some people, donating meat is not an option because they use everything they take in a year. It's part of their lifestyle and economic situation."

The biggest challenge of the Sportsmen Against Hunger program is how to pay for the processing of venison or other wild game donated by those who hunt. Sometimes the person donating will pay for the processing as part of the gifting process, Kreil said, while in other instances local civic groups or wildlife clubs will pay for a set number of animals.

In an attempt to address this issue, some people have suggested that an increase in the deer license fee be implemented to fund the processing of donated venison. "While such a decision would take legislative action, our



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Department does not believe it is necessary or wise to create such a dedicated funding source," Kreil said. "The act of donating venison should be voluntary and up to the individual. Everyone who hunts should not be required to donate to such a cause."

In addition, Kreil said, there may come a time when deer populations decrease significantly and the number of animals donated would drop dramatically and the need for these funds would fade.

The Game and Fish Department is contributing to the efforts of Pollert and her network in several ways. For more than a decade Game and Fish has collected deer hides at its Bismarck office each deer season. The money, about \$2,800 in 2005 and 2006, that comes from the donated hides has been going to the Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.

"After hearing Ann's presentation, the Game and Fish Department director and management team decided to donate future proceeds from the collected deer hides for processing venison," Kreil said. "The Department has also made it a matter of practice to donate venison and pay for the processing of big game animals that need to be removed due to nuisance problems or other situations where they must be put down."

Today – the good old days of deer hunting – as many hunters go afield with multiple licenses, the availability of extra deer hanging in hunting camps is at its premium.

"Not everyone gets the opportunity to go deer hunting because maybe they don't have the time or money," Tabor said. "Since we are able to get multiple deer tags, it's a plus for hunters, landowners who need deer harvested, and it should be a good time for charities. It's not like I have to have all the meat."

Last deer gun season in North Dakota, more than 100,000 animals were taken, which was a record. Who knows what the 2007 season will bring, but prospects look bright as 148,550 licenses – another all-time high – were made available to hunters.

"North Dakota's (November) deer season is perfect timing as food pantries in the state are hit hard at Christmas ... they're hit hard all winter," Pollert said.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota **OUTDOORS**.



Hungry in North Dakota

- Each month, more than 26,000 people in North Dakota seek and receive assistance from charitable programs supplied by Great Plains Food Bank. Almost 40 percent of those served at food pantries in North Dakota are children.
- Last year, about one in 12 North Dakotans received help from a food shelf or charitable meal program.
- Despite all of the food assistance provided by charitable organizations and government programs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that more than 18,000 North Dakota households still remain food insecure or hungry.

Donating Vension

If your group is interested in starting a venison donation program, North Dakota Community Action Association has a Sportsmen Against Hunger brochure that can help. For a brochure, call Ann Pollert, NDCAA executive director, at 701-232-2452 or e-mail her at annp@sendcaa.org.

Hunters wanting to donate deer are also encouraged to call or e-mail Pollert for a list of cooperating meat processors.

Pollert said donated venison needs to be processed in an inspected facility. "We get a lot of calls from people wanting to clean out their freezers," she said. "Although we'd love to take the venison, we just can't ensure it has been kept at a safe temperature."

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